

## AT THE END OF FIVE YEARS.

By FRANK LEE BENEDICT.

Miss Jemima Denby wrote a long, characteristic letter to Laura Herford, and I shall give it here because it will explain the little story I want to tell.

My Dear Laura —So you are back from Europe, after five years of wanderings, and still you are plain Miss, in spite of all the fine things we have heard and read of your being about to marry Lord This, or Marquis T'other.

The last report, was, you were to take young Count T-, and now he's going to marry a Boston Girl. Bless me! do you mean to be a hardened spinster like myself? Well, I can't blame you; the men are not what they were, and they were always worth little enough— they would be the most absurd of created creatures if there were no women.

But I had a reason for writing, and if I don't make haste and tell it I shall forget. I want you to come to Beechfield at once. I have invited a party of the young folk of your girlish days—you must com'e. I don't invite your aunt, because she and I have a pleasant hat of thirty good years between us, and we should be sure to come lo blows if shut up in the same house. She's a dragon—so ami; let's howl, each in her own jungle.

My niece and her husband, your old friend Cicy, have bought a place near me. My dear, Preston Eterett is a jewel, and he's married, so you can flirt with him. By-the-way, one of your old beaux. Fred Voorhies, is with them— he's been in California for an age. They used to say you were fond of each other; so you had better come, or I shall think it was true, and that you are afraid to see him. Now you are vexed, that's what I wanted.

So you are a beauty acknowledged—the emperor said so! Well, well, when you were thirteen, people said your hair was red—I knew it was

just the tint you see in Venetian pictures—and now that blondes are the rage, other folk have found it out.

As for your emperor, I knew him ages since in London. Yes, indeed; and I told him once he had the most atrocious nose ever put on a man's face; and Count D'Orsay laughed. The prince hadn't a word to say for himself; and, I'll warrant you just from that, he remembers me—men always remember a woman that scratches them; and, I thank heaven, I've done my duty in the way of saying unpleasant things to people.

Now, come at once and show your new dresses. Old Jemima Denby.

Miss Herford was still in town when she received her letter; and very much bored she was, for she had a troop of relations about her, and the weather was getting very warm. The trees in the Park looked as if they had put on brown Holland shrouds; and Murray Hill was a desert of dust, not sand.

Yes, she would go to dear old Miss Denby. It would be pleasant to see the places, and the people she had liked when life was fresher than it looked now, and Miss Gem's highly spiced speeches would be an agreeable contrast to the incessant adulation she had received for a sufficient length of time to make it wearisome.

What did she mean by that mention of Fred Voorhies? Had the ridiculous people been saying she still cared for him and Miss Gem had taken that way to give her a hint, that she might silence their tongues by appearing among them in all the gorgeousness of her power?

But, after all, what was the gossip of silly heads to her? Still, she would go—it would be a relief to be free from her worldly old aunt for a time; then she reproached herself for that thought. Yes, actually she would like to see Fred Voorhies; Laura, the woman, would like to look at the man whom Laura, the girl, had loved, or the reality of what was her ideal.

"I dare say," said Laura, to herself, "that though the man has been nothing to me for years, in some absurd way that old dream has stood between me and common sense. I really ought to marry! I'll go and look

at the dead things of the past, then I'll come back and be sensible. I ought to marry Mr. Lenox—I should like to be an ambassadress. Oh, dear me! I love nobody and nothing!"

All the people were out on an expedition when she reached Beechfield, so she had a comfortable rest, and a quiet dish of tea in her room; and then in came Miss Gem, looking as young as she did when Laura was a tiny girl and one of her prime favorites.

"Humph!" said Miss Gem, after they had talked awhile. "you are in the bored stage—the surest proof you've had an awful amount of adoration. You're very handsome, but you look too indifferent. Why, you're just in the mood when even new dresses are a weariness. Well, you'll get over it."

"Shall I?" Laura Asked.

"Yes, people get over everything! I've been bored myself—dreadful it was but look at me now! Bless me! I'm too busy—I'm ruling people, or I'm bothering people, or I'm setting people straight, or I'm subduing my relations, or I'm hunting up a language new to me, or I have a geological fit, or a botanical spasm. Oh! there's always something."

"Is there?" asked Laura.

"You'll find it! Bless you, you think you've lived it all out. Oh! you've oceans to learn yet! But I'm glad to have you here! Do as you like. All I ask of my guests is to be in the drawing-room by half-past seven, so I needn't be kept waiting for my dinner."

And then they laughed, and Laura felt herself getting more life, just from the mere sight of wonderful old Miss Gem, who was the grandest old maid that ever lived.

As there was a party, dinner was not till eight that day; and as Laura had a gloomy fit come over her after Miss Gem's departure, she did not take the trouble to go downstairs till nearly the hour.

There were some twenty people gathered when she appeared; and, of course, everybody was looking at her—and she was worth it! She wore a marvelous dress, and looked like a goddess!

Up came old friends and new people, and it was a repetition of the story Laura was so tired of; and she heard foolish things, and said lazy things, and wished it was bed-time.

And presently she saw Miss Gem talking to a man who had just come in—a tall, pale man, with a long, brown mustache and great, brown eyes, that were handsome, and would have been handsomer if they had not looked gloomy and tired, and a wonderfully thorough-bred look altogether, and she knew it was Fred Voorhies; but how he was altered!

She had expected him to be changed, but not in this way. He had been buried in the mountains, down by the Pacific, busy drawing a fortune out of a Nevada silver-mine. She had made up her mind to see him a little coarse, a little fussy, perhaps; already very fond of good things to eat, for he was thirty; and here he was cold, and bored, and elegant still.

They were going toward the dining-room before he happened to be near her, or was apparently aware of her presence. Then she held out her hand quietly, and said,

"I believe we need no introduction, Mr. Voorhies. I am very glad to see you."

"I am very happy to welcome you back," said Fred Voorhies, bowing low over her hand.

They were not near enough each other at table to talk, and Laura saw fit to talk a great deal to those about her in her most languid and heartless manner; and Fred Voorhies, down at his end of the board, was making the people laugh by stories of camp life, and was as brilliant as possible; and Laura, catching words occasionally, tried to think he was coarse, and did not succeed.

After dinner, she did not see much more of him; for pretty little Mrs.

Lambert took possession of him. Laura talked and laughed, and made new victims enough to have satisfied any reasonable creature; but the evening was as dull to her as such evenings had been for a long, long time.

That night, when she was alone in her room, Laura wondered how, as a young girl, she could ever have been foolish enough to let a girl's dream and a girl's fancy become so powerful. Fred Voorhies was the merest trifler, she said, a man who lived on the surface of existence, and was content so to do; whose innate, well-bred, and very probably good-natured selfishness, made him avoid earnestness in any form.

"It would have been all the same, then," said Laura, "whoever the man might have been. I had to dream my dream and live my romance --girls are such idiots! The first man, with a handsome face that came in my way, I naturally concluded was the reality of my ideal— a beautiful one I chose, and a blessed young donkey I was. Well, I shall never be in love now; it is altogether too late," and Laura felt several centuries old, at least; "and I must marry—I think that's rather a bore; but, then, everything about life is a bore."

Then Laura decided to go to sleep, and told herself she was doing it for some time; and at last, discovered she was telling a lie, for she was broad, staring awake, and, in spite of herself, feeling hot and wrathful toward Fred Voorhies, because he had altogether beaten her at her own game of elegant indifference.

And in the same clear, yellow moonlight, Fred Voorhies sat by his open window at an hour when a reasonable man ought to have been in bed, and smoked a great deal of the very strongest golden leaf in his biggest meerschaum—what he called his storm-pipe, which was reserved for restless seasons like this.

"And the woman is just what the girl promised to be." he growled, internally. "A mere specimen of airs and breeding—a regular fine lady," thought Fred. "Bah! I hate the species! Yet how I did love that girl! Well, it's all over, and when a woman makes a fool of me again, she'll be keener than any of the race I'm acquainted with."

Up rose Fred, shook the ashes out of his pipe, knocking it with unnecessary violence on the window-sill, and uttering a single ejaculation aloud, not at all complimentary to women in general. Then he went to bed.

Finally, the next day came, and all the Beechfield party were over at the Everett's place for luncheon. After that there was to be an expedition through the woods to the top of Eagle's Bluff, which was one of the show places of the neighborhood.

Laura Herford, and such of the women as knew they could manage to walk about a house in a habit without looking absurd, had come on horseback. No, there was one woman who looked absurd, and did not know it—a bony, high-shouldered, giggling, ringleted old maid. Miss Gem always invited one silly specimen of the race as a foil to herself, she frankly owned. Laura looked like a queen on horseback, and she walked like Diana in a riding-habit, and I need not say more.

And on the road through the beautiful old forest, by a mere accident, as they thought, (though it was the work of fate, as performed by Miss Jemima, who was on horseback, too, and as capable of leaping a five-barred gate as a woman of twenty-five) Laura and Fred found themselves side by side; and they talked, perhaps rather too much, in their mutual eagerness to show how changed and wise they had become.

And, apropos to some worldly remark of Laura's, Fred said, "But, dear me, didn't all New York, last winter, say you were about to become what the shoddy woman called a 'lordess'—it was cruel of you to disappoint people."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Laura, feeling an inward rage that made her fingers tingle to hit him in the face with her riding-whip. "I feel it a duty to disappoint people—it does them good."

"I'm sure I congratulate you on having a 'duty' of any sort," drawled Fred. "Is it nice? Wonder if a fellow could be vaccinated for it, or something of

that, sort, you know?"

Was he talking in that empty-headed way because he was a blatant idiot who copied English models? Then came another thought— was he doing it from insolence, coolly making fun of the fine people she had been talking about?

"I believe," said she, in a voice that was too civil for her words to sound rude, "you have only lately been released from very unpleasant duties, so you must have a tolerably clear idea of what they are like."

"Oh, dear, yes!" said Fred, with a good-natured laugh; "you mean to remind me I'm a parvenue, not born to greatness, and so forth. Fact, too. Odd, isn't it, how some one forgets one's beginnings? Oh, yes! I grubbed with a pick, and wore a blue flannel shirt, and went unshaved—no wonder you shudder; and I might be at it yet, if I hadn't happened to strike the 'lucky,' as the miners say; and just then along came a lot of capitalists, fellows made of money, you know, and bought me out."

"Ah, indeed! What a pretty vine that is!" And Laura looked as if she would like to yawn, but all in the civil, elegant way that can be made to hold so much insolence.

"Yes, to both remarks," said Fred. "If that vine could only be trained and cultivated, how pretty it would be."

Laura decided that he meant to be impertinent.

"This sort of expedition is a frightful bore, isn't it?" said she.

"Oh, frightful! But when one is weak enough to visit one's friends, one must expect to be victimised."

"Complimentary to all parties," said Laura. "Your hostess would be charmed if she heard you."

"Ah! but she don't; and I will retract my heresy before I visit you at that English castle."

"I doubt if I shall have Americans about me," replied she, "I don't fancy them."

"How inconsiderate of your ancestor, whatever one it was, to emigrate, and so make you a Yankee in spite of yourself," said Fred.

"The air of Nevada has given you an amazing flow of spirits, Mr. Voorhies," said Laura. "I think we will wait for the carriage to come up, it is a shame of me to enjoy your conversation by myself. I dare say they are very dull without you."

Then Fred would have liked to bite her; but yet how handsome she was! He called himself by a great many opprobrious epithets in a flash; then he laughed.

"Are you too much bored for endurance?" he asked.

"Oh, dear, no! I can bear a great deal! I only did not want to be selfish."

"Well, positively, since you are so kind, I may take the liberty of an old, old acquaintance to admit that I had forgotten to tell Mrs. Lambert something I promised to find out for her; so, since you wish it, we'll wait for the rest of the people." '

"What a pretty creature she is," said Laura, looking quite enthusiastic.

And, because she said that so honestly, Fred could not see that Mrs. Lambert was very pretty, after all.

"A little faded," said he.

"Possibly," returned Laura. "Yes, I dare say, she is only a year younger than I. She's twenty-three; and really 'tis an immense age for a woman."

So she had Fred at a little disadvantage in her turn, and felt better natured; they both laughed.



"I believe I don't quite know what to say," said he.

"No, I see you don't! Never mind, don't be discouraged. You've not been long out of the mine; I dare say you'll improve."

"Thanks," said Fred; but his laugh sounded just as real, and there was no sign of being in the least touched. "Now, if I could only have a teacher like you—those women yonder are very well, but you, who are familiar with the ways of lords and ladies, and know exactly what ought to be said or done on all occasions, your advice would be invaluable."

Laura wanted to use her whip again.

"There are times," said she, and it was a great effort to say it pleasantly, "when people would do better to say nothing."

"Appear better, you mean, perhaps?"

"Perhaps I do! How those horses creep; at this rate it will be midnight before we get to the top."

"Now that's cruel of you, when I am thoroughly enjoying this meeting you—one so seldom comes across one's old friends."

"Oh, bless me!" said Laura, "don't you think even seldom is several times too often? Old friends remind one that one is growing old. They say, 'Why, you haven't changed in the least;' and of all annoying speeches, that is the worst."

"I shall not say it, Miss Herford," said Fred, more gravely; "you are thoroughly changed."

"Perhaps you have no clear recollection of what I was—I mean how I looked, of course."

But he was not to be caught that way.

"Naturally I had not," said he; "one can't carry mental photographs of

one's friends about for centuries; but now that I see you, I notice the change plainly."

"I am very much handsomer than I was as a young girl," said Laura, coolly; "I was too thin, and I was dreadfully awkward and shy."

"You were reticent, rather than shy. Oh, no! you weren't awkward!"

"How good of you!"

"As for the beauty..."

"That I never allow to be discussed."

"Pardon; you mentioned it."

"Being my own, such as it is, I may take the liberty;" and she slightly emphasised the pronoun.

Then up came the carriages, and the rest of the equestrians, and the conversation ended; and each, instead of feeling politely indifferent toward the other, as both had intended, felt irritated and annoyed, and wanted to talk more, and say a great many atrocious thing!.

This was the beginning of a line of conduct which they pursued toward each other for a full fortnight; and though both meant to be perfectly careless and indifferent, it was impossible that tolerably strong feelings should not be roused in their minds.

There were times when Laura cherished a hot resentment toward the man whom she had so proudly declared to have passed out of her life, and to be nothing but a name to her. Yet, even when they parted, both sore from a sharp, wordy conflict, no matter what subject came up, they managed, unconsciously to themselves, to bring personal feeling into it; and Laura thought for a half-hour she would go away and not be exposed to meeting that intensely aggravating man again. She staid, and as the hour for his daily visit approached, would find herself restless, with the old feeling strong, as if "waiting" for something; but when she discovered

that, she explained it to herself by asserting that it was because "he set her nerves on edge."

And Fred went through all the stages of varying emotions, and very soon owned to himself that he was far from as indifferent as he had supposed; nay, the time came when he quarreled with himself for loving her still, with all the passion of early youth, that had, apparently, been frozen into coldness, awakened to add its fire to the strength of his emotions.

He wondered at himself, knowing that she was heartless, that she had cast him off because, in the old days, they were both poor, and she was not true woman enough to be willing to wait, or to dare poverty.

And Miss Jemima, looking blind as an owl in the sun, saw and understood exactly how matters stood, and chuckled privately over their contentions, their elaborate civility to one another, Laura's elegant, fine lady airs, and Fred's nineteenth-century manners, which is supposed to say, "Lived it all out ages ago, you know—feeling, and love, and pleasure and all that rubbish. Yes, by Jove! very well in novels, you see, 'cause the beggars must write."

Miss Jemima saw it all, and never so much as blinked suspicion. She made the house very gay; and everybody declared it was Miss Gem's crowning summer in the way of making things delightful.

Even Laura, to her intense astonishment and disgust, found herself actually amused; she who knew the world "from core to husk," and had lived through such centuries up to the sublime height of polite indifference, upon which one is not to be disturbed, though the sky fall, or one's friends are all swept away by a storm into the Gulf of Mexico.

Finally, the time came when Laura must depart—there was some previous engagement which must be kept—and Miss Gem decided that if these two parted in the state of mind they then were, probably nothing could ever be done to set matters straight in this world, for Laura would marry her titled man, and Fred would undoubtedly—she reasoned logically, from her knowledge of humanity—proceed to make an immense fool of himself without delay.

So one day, when she and Laura were sitting together in a summer-house, away out in the shrubberies, and had been talking an immensity, and Gem had encouraged her in her worldliness and her cynicism, the crafty old maid said, suddenly,

"I'll tell you what, Laura, that flirtation you had years ago with Fred Voorhies was just what you needed—it showed you what trash romance is."

And Laura kept her free perfectly unmoved, but she did feel at that moment that she hated Miss Gem.

"Yes, indeed," continued Jemima, "it did you a world of good! If you had been a little more in earnest it would have been still better. "

This was too aggravating

"Thank you," said Laura, "I was quite enough in earnest. You and I tell the truth to each other—"

"Yes, sometimes," interrupted Gem.

"Very well; as much as women can."

"That's better," said Gem; "and men can't tell it at all. But what is the truth?"

"That I was, like any dreaming girl, in love with my ideal—really in love, mind you. I thought Fred Voorhies was the reality—that was my mistake. I discovered the fact very soon, and, of course, from that time he was nothing to me."

"Of course," said Jemima, dryly. "But how did you happen to be wise enough to find out before it was too late to remedy matters?"

"Because he was a born trifler," said Laura, contemptuously. "When he began to reflect, he saw he had gone farther than would be comfortable

for his selfishness; so he began to be afraid of poverty for me."

"Sweet creatures men are—so thoughtful," said Jemima. "So you saw it, and sent him about his business?"

"Naturally. It came out in a conversation he had with my aunt, who, if not exactly a woman you like, you will acknowledge is a very shrewd, clear-sighted woman."

"Very shrewd," said Jemima; and felt an unwomanly and unchristian desire to swear—for she was certain now of what she had always suspected, that the "old cat had done it."

And Jemima, looking down the walk—she had eyes like a lynx—saw Fred Voorhies in the distance. She sat still and allowed Laura to diverge to worldly wisdom, by way of proving how far she had lived beyond that girlish folly.

"Yes, yes, you are right," said Jemima; "you were meant to be a duchess! My dear, never let heart stand in the way of common sense."

And again Laura felt she hated her.

"Bear me!" said Gem, "I forgot about my farmer—he wanted to see me. Stay here and read; I'll be back soon—it's nice to get away from the people."

Off she trotted—met Fred Voorhies, put her arm in his, whirled him suddenly into a sidepath, and shook her fist in his face, all without a word.

"Does that mean good-morning?" asked Fred.

«Fred, my love," said Jemima, "all men are asses—you're the biggest one I know."

"Thank you," said Fred.

"You needn't; it's a pleasure to me to speak the truth—sometimes."

"If any woman in the world ever feels disposed for that, I wouldn't stop her," quoth sarcastic Fred.

"Let me see," said Jemima; "weren't you once engaged to Laura Herford?"

"I believe the lady did me the honor to let me think so, till she got frightened at my being in earnest."

"How do you mean?"

"She was afraid of the poverty, and commissioned her old fiend of an aunt—I beg your pardon—"

"Don't, I pray! Call her worse names if you like, my dear; my morality is well seasoned, and can bear a great deal. Her aunt—"

"To inform me of the fact? No; to beat round the bush till I saw what she was at. You may be sure I very speedily set her mind at rest."

"Yes, indeed, sure you did! and Jemima nodded her head, and seemed to approve immensely. "You flew into one of your old rages at once."

"I believe I did."

"Yes, yes; and sent aunt and niece to— to well, where the angels don't go."

"I did not care where she went," growled Fred; "she was not the girl I had believed— she was nothing to me."

Jemima stopped nodding, fixed him with her big, gray eyes, and an uplifted finger.

"Oh! you double-distilled essence of all that's silly—you man!" said she. "And the blessed aunt who liked you so much, and was sorry Laura was

frivolous. Oh! I know! She told Laura you were afraid, and lazy—"

"She lied!" shouted Fred.

"Did she? Well, don't scream. I hate to have my robins frightened—it's all over now."

"Over!" yelled Fred. "That girl broke my heart! She might have known I was ready to dig, beg—die for her!"

"Dear me!" said Jemima. "What an odd coincidence!"

"What is?" snapped he.

"Why, so was she for you; and aunty, dear soul! said you wanted to be let off."

"The infernal old—"

"Yes, indeed; very nice woman! Well, well! it's all for the best—you don't care about her now! She was just telling me how wise her aunt was; how she found out you wanted to draw back."

"Who was?" snarled Fred, beginning to feel dizzy.

"Laura, of course. Why, how stupid you are! She's in the summer-house. But come with me, I want to show you my lilies."

Fred almost pushed her out of the way, unconsciously, as he would have pushed, or tried to, fire, water, a mountain, that had stood between him and Laura, and dashed toward the arbor.

Gem stood and looked after him, and smiled.

"Old woman," said she, "you are not worth much, but you've been allowed to do a little good."

She walked slowly toward the house; but it was several hours after

before anybody saw Laura and Fred Voorhies.

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